

Death by Suburb sermon series
#5 – Grace: Hiring A Cross-Bearing Service
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You may or may not know the name Joni Eareckson Tada. Joni is a well-known Christian writer and speaker who has inspired millions through her books, radio programs, and her Christian outreach organization Joni and Friends.

She is also a quadriplegic. A diving accident when she was young left her paralyzed from the neck down and confined to a wheelchair. Despite this tragedy, Joni has been able to use her disability as a means for reaching out and spreading the gospel to people in similar circumstances around the world.

David Goetz, in his book “Death by Suburb,” tells the story of an interview he conducted with Joni several years back. As he fumbled and stumbled with how to interact with her (at one point he handed her a magazine to look at without realizing she couldn’t hold it), he was amazed at her graciousness and willingness to accept help. He said when they discussed the meaning of suffering, one comment she made stuck with him and continues to haunt him. In an almost off-handed way, in talking about her circumstance, Joni said, “I think life is supposed to be hard.”

But that perspective doesn’t fit into our suburban existence. Today we continue our “Death by Suburb” sermon series as we look at ways we can continue to grow deeper spiritually in a culture that is at best apathetic and at worst hostile to such growth.

Back in January I preached a sermon series called “Christianity’s Dirty Words,” and one of the words we looked at was “suffering.” I made the point then that the concept of suffering in Christianity is one that we often run away from because we can’t make sense of it. Shouldn’t giving yourself to Christ make life better, not worse?

But suffering is a key part of the Bible, especially in the New Testament, where the words “suffer” or “suffering” occur 86 times. The people who were reading and hearing the New Testament when it was first being shared knew what suffering was all about. They were experiencing it on a daily basis, and it was much different than our modern definition of suffering.

Today, living in suburban America, we are in many ways disconnected from the biblical understanding of suffering. Webster’s defines “suffer” as “to undergo or feel pain or distress.” But that definition has been fudged a bit when we read that a football team suffered its first loss, or when someone says, “I had to suffer through that sermon after drinking three cups of coffee.” Hard times are when Rte. 22 is down to one lane because of construction. For us “suffering” describes anything that even slightly threatens the comfortable state of existence we’ve worked hard to create for ourselves.

In fact, you could argue that we’ve conditioned ourselves to believe that to suffer is an unnecessary interruption of our normal life. We do everything in our power to reduce or eliminate suffering. We buy chairs that massage and flavored coffees and cars with heated seats until “suffering” no longer has anything to do with “undergoing or feeling pain and distress.” “Suffering” becomes sitting in a cold car seat or sitting in a boring old chair that does nothing but sits there or drinking coffee that tastes like...coffee. We’ve diluted the meaning of “suffering.” It no longer means “to undergo

or feel pain or distress.” It now means “to do without an expected luxury or to have our sense of entitlement disrupted.”

And that is why I believe Joni’s quote hits us in the gut. We’ve constructed our lives in such a way that we’ve come to expect that life was meant to be easy, and when it’s not, we believe something is wrong (and it’s usually God’s fault). Instead, what Joni is saying is life that is meant to be hard, and any period of our lives that isn’t defined by struggle or adversity is a blessing.

Think about all the services we have at our disposal to remove from our lives the more mundane or difficult aspects. We can pay people to mow our lawns, watch our kids, look after our parents, pick up our dry cleaning, deliver our groceries, drive us to the airport, help our kids with their homework, and do our Christmas shopping.

And yet, we can’t hire someone to bear our crosses for us. Wouldn’t it be nice if there were a service we could hire that would have cancer for us, or straighten out our children for us, or worry about paying the mortgage for us? Life would be so much easier if someone else would handle the hard parts for us so we could just enjoy it.

But I wonder if life isn’t supposed to be hard. That’s certainly the message I get from Paul this morning. He says that suffering produces character and character produces hope. Hope is the desire that things will be better than what they are. Because life is hard, we always have a reason for hope.

A more modern writer named Len Sweet says it this way: “We’ve become so used to being fed on demand with quick fixes that we’ve forgotten that it’s the hard knocks in life, those character-building moments, that help us make it through life with inner peace and joy intact.”

We better begin remembering, because as we age, life is not going to get any easier. Here’s proof: There are more replacement parts in this congregation than in a ’68 Mustang. As we get older and lose more and control over our lives, we embark on what Richard Rohr calls the journey of descent. That journey is difficult for those of us who are used to being control of who does what and when they do it.

That’s why we struggle with what we perceive to be God’s unfairness. Just when we think we are in control of life, it picks us up like a tornado and drops us in some random place of despair, like an attorney’s office or a hospital room or a wheelchair. And we think, “God, what have I done to deserve this?”

What we’ve done is we’ve dared to live. Simply being alive is a risky proposition, and every day we expose ourselves to the forces of life that threaten our livelihood, well-being, and very existence. No amount of money or comfort or stability changes the fact that, as so many of us know too well, life can change, and we have no control over it.

What we do control is our attitude about those inevitable changes. It would have been easy for Joni to trade in her hope for despair or self-pity, and I’m sure she had her moments. But she chose to see God at work in the midst of her suffering, and out of that came character, hope, and a life lived with purpose and determination.

Deitrich Bonhoeffer was a German theologian who was outspoken against the Nazi regime of his country, so much so that he was imprisoned and later killed for it. His writings are some of the most profound I’ve ever read, because he wrote them with a cross on his back in the shape of a swastika. When he wrote about suffering, he was writing it from prison. And here’s what he said: “God is nearer to suffering than to happiness.”

Now think about that. We work hard to create a life of happiness and to avoid suffering, and yet Bonhoeffer, who should know something about both, says we're moving in the wrong direction. We're looking for God in suburbia, when we're more likely to find him in the hospice ward or the county jail.

Does that mean if we want find Jesus we should go get arrested? I don't recommend it. But to me it says three things. First, even the most perfect life endures suffering. Something is going to get every one of us at some point. Second, when that does happen, it's not God's fault; that's simply a consequence of choosing to live. And third, God is there with us during our dark times, even if it feels like He is absent. God is nearer to suffering than to happiness.

I don't think I have to tell you that, because deep down, you already know. We've all suffered, and I don't mean a cold car seat, I mean real suffering, and deep down we know that what we experienced wasn't the punishment of a capricious God; it was life being life. The danger we face is not the suffering itself, but letting those valleys rob us of the joy of life. Because regardless of the circumstances, there is still joy to be found in life, even if it's found from a wheelchair, or in a smaller house, or with a less-than-perfect child. We can fight and complain and wonder what we did to deserve our lot in life, or we can accept it with humility and grace, knowing that there is a deeper joy to be found, and that joy is from God.

You know what? Maybe we have it all wrong. Maybe we live and suffer and die and that's it. Life can certainly be cruel enough to make us wonder. But as Christians, we choose to believe something else is true. What's the alternative? A life of bitterness, hopelessness, isolation. We believe something else is true. And that is the source of our hope, a light which no darkness can extinguish, thanks be to God.